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ABSTRACT

Public relations (PR) research on the teaching of critical thinking shows that PR practitioners must possess the communications skills and social sensitivity necessary to help organizations adapt to their environments. PR students must learn to think critically and to take an active role in learning. Practice in questioning educators' and researchers' conclusions will give PR students the opportunity to transfer critical thinking skills to functional communication situations. Possible critical thinking development exercises include having students: (1) decide which of a series of news releases, brochures, or annual reports are better written, more creative, etc.; (2) analyze PR approaches within campaigns; (3) locate examples of unethical PR materials; (4) explain the role of PR in society; and (5) develop a PR campaign for a dummy corporation. In using PR textbooks, the teacher should encourage students to ask questions about what they read, seek sources of information, examine solutions and suggestions, question their own beliefs, evaluate research findings, and question definitions. Students should be rewarded for trying to improve their thinking skills. (SG)

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The Application of Critical Thinking Skills In The Public Relations Curriculum

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When an organization is in an environment of continous social change, to survive that organization must also change. Public relations (PR) practitioners must possess the comunications skills and social sensitivity necessary to help organizations adapt to their environments. Public relations practitioners must understand public opinion, develop PR campaigns, create effective messages, and evaluate the effectiveness of their work. They do this by understanding the communication process, methods of management, and the organization's environment.

This paper summarizes research on the teaching of critical thinking. It also illustrates how critical thinking activities can be integrated into a public relations course. It is hoped that these critical thinking activities will help PR students develop the skills to help oraganizations adapt to their ever changing environments.

If PR students are to possess the skills necessary to help organizations adapt to their environment, PR students must learn to think critically. The National Institute of Education (NIE) in 1984 concluded that a college education should enable students not only to adapt to their changing world but to critically evaluate those changes. Siegel (1988) urged educators to coach students to think critically about specific subjects. Other researchers have speculated that better thinking will come from better reading (Spiegel 1990), that creativity should be encouraged to promote critical thinking (Atkins 1990) and that "self-knowledge" is vital to critical thinking (Lauer 1990).

Nickerson (1988-90) states, "...while we do not have to be taught to think, most of us could use some help in learning to

think better..." D'Angelo (1975) argues that the task of communication teachers is to make students aware of how they already think. His conceptual theory of rhetoric is a study of the relationship between thinking and discourse. By observing whole pieces of discourse, D'Angelo shows how verbal patterns are usually present and are representations of our everyday thinking patterns. But despite interest in developing college students' critical thinking ability Terenzin, Theophilides, & Lorang, (1984) found few published studies documenting specific curriculum materials or instructional methods. Critical thinking requires PR students active participation in the learning process. Rather than reading every word in a text or copying lecture material and accepting it at face value PR students must take an active role in questioning researchers' and educators' conclusions. PR students should be able to pause, reflect, and consider numerous factors before accepting a given answer. Practice with these skills will give PR students the opportunity to transfer these skills to functional communication situations.

Dewey (1926) said, "If we once start thinking, no one can guarantee where we shall come out...Every thinker puts some portion of an apparently stable world in peril." Assuming that PR students should think for themselves, in Dewey's sense of the word, they should challenge their educators and textbooks. Critical thinking is adopting an attitude that is open to both sides of an argument. It is the capacity to distinguish beliefs from knowledge, and fact from judgement. The PR student should first define the problem, examine the evidence, and analyze the

assumptions underlying the evidence. PR students should be taught to find good reasons to support or reject an argument--not just accept it on blind faith.

In order for students to learn from a public relations course they need to think critically about public relations. The challenge for PR teachers is to stimulate their students to question why and when to send a news release or what is the best approach to inform a public on an organization's stand on an issue. PR students need to learn more than the mechanics of putting together a news release or a six-panel brochure. Taking notes from a lecture or memorizing how to stucture a Gant Chart does not equal learning about public relations. When PR students learn to think critically they not only increase their understanding of public relations but can apply this skill to help organizations adapt to their ever changing environments.

Examples of Applications of Critical Thinking Activities

Each activity should include a goal, objective, procedure, and evaluation. Some type of evaluation (graded or ungraded) is important to gage students' improvement to think critically about public relations. I do not grade the discussion activities thus letting students develop their critical thinking skills free from evaluation. The PR campaign is graded using imput from my students.

1. Teachers should show examples (i.e. news releases, brochures, annual reports) and students should decide which ones they feel are better written, more creative, etc. Have students develop a

needs to do what and when to implement their campaign as well as explain the use of money from a budget.

Example Public Relations Campaign

Kem Development, Inc.

CEO Karin-Leigh Spicer
CFO Edward J. Blake
COO Swiss Mocha

Company Net Worth 1 billion
Resort Project 5.2 million
PR Budget for Resort 75 thousand

News Release	10 thousand	PSA (5)	35 thousand
Newsletter (1000)	5 thousand	Brochure (500)	10 thousand
Open House	20 thousand	TV Commercial	(1) 50 thousand

Kem is a one billion dollar construction company building resorts, condo communities, and office buildings throughout the United States. These are considered investments and Kem has usually sold each project within four years of its completion date. Kem has built office complex parks in Chicago, Dallas, and Columbus, Ohio and resort hotels in Denver, Orlando, and Thousand Islands, New York. Over six hundred condo communities have been built throughout the midwest states and in California and Texas. All of these structures are noted for their environmental designs (blending with its surrounding habitat), handicap accessibility, and expensive building costs. Kem's overall construction costs per building (because of the aforementioned features) run 5 to 10 percent above similar constructions companies.

Kem's goal is to develop a building that adds to a community's service, profitability, and beauty. Kem is a very image conscious company and stresses quality and value in their

set of criteria for evaluating work.

2. When students look at PR case studies have them not only analyze their effectiveness but the approach taken. Can students suggest other approaches, publics to target, or media to use.

3. Have students bring in examples of PR material they feel are unethical. Have them explain why. How could they alter the material to make it ethical? What do they base their conclusions on?

4. The history of Public Relations has had its ups and downs (P.T. Barnum, Press Agentry-----Ivy Lee, Not-For-Profit Organizations). How would students explain the role of PR in today's society to skeptics? How would they accept the responsibilities of providing information, but also recognize the role of providing mamgement with information on the nature and realities of public opinion?

5. Have students develop a public relations campaign for a dummy corporation. Students will determine the problem/opportunity, goal(s), objectives, and policies of the organization. Students will do the research necessary to better define the problems, publics, objectives, etc. Students will develop a campaign theme--a single message or message-set---that serves as the heart of the campaign. Students will plan campaign materials (news release, PSA, newsletter, open house). These materials should be adequate to address the organization's objectives. Students should be able to sell the campaign. Explain why the materials they selected are right for the campaign, its goals, objectives, and publics. Finally, students will propose a campaign calendar which describes in detail who

buildings and services.

Kem has been awarded a permit by the Greene County Commissioners to build a resort hotel on Caeser's Creek. This will be a 5.2 million dollar project with Kem hiring 200 construction workers locally. When completed the hotel will contain 500 rooms, two restaurants, piano bar, indoor/outdoo pool, tennis courts and a a nine hole par three golf course. The resort will need a staff of 95 full-time and 45 part-time employees.

Problems:
1) Convince Dayton and surrounding communities of the need and benefits of this resort.
2) Convince potential guests of Dayton's vacations "possibilities."
3) Develop an attractive package for potential buyers of the resort.

Six Critical Thinking Activities for the Textbook

Textbooks used as examples:

Baskin, O. & Aronoff, C. 1988. Public Relations The Profession And The Practice. Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown.

Hendrix, J.A., 1988. Public Relations Cases. Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth.

Wilcox, D.L. & Nolte, L.W., 1990. Public Relations Writing And Media Techniques. New York: Harper & Row.

1. **Ask Questions.** According to Wilcox & Nolte (p. 47) one can be personally held liable for any statements one makes. What is libel? How does one represent one's company? Do organizations

have their own policies? What is the law? Can students give examples of statements they feel are libel? If so, why?

2. **What is the information based on?** Wilcox & Nolte (p. 26) state that an opinion is " an expression of attitude." How do the authors come to this conclusion? What is this information based on? Studies? Theories? Do students feel comfortable with this information? Can students expand on this information? Do students feel comfortable taking this statement at face value?

3. **Look at solutions and suggestions.** Hendrix presents a series of problems corporations have experienced (i.e Campbell Soup Co., Coleco, Boys Club of America), the public relations campaign each company implemented, the results, and an evaluation of PR campaign. What criteria does Hendrix use to evaluate the companies' PR solutions? The companies' suggestions? Can students suggest additonal solutions? Can students suggest alternative ways to evaluate a PR campaign? Do students feel the solutions used in the campaigns were successful?

4. **Question one's own belief?** Baskin & Aronoff (p.153) state that, "a small but well-organized special interest group can sometimes influence decisions that affect the majority (i.e. MADD)." Can students give examples where a special interest group has influenced their beliefs? An example where one did not? How do students reach their beliefs? What indviduals or groups influence students?

5. **Look at studies.** According to Baskin & Aronoff (p. 106)

Syracuse University used several focus groups composed of alumni to help plan a major fund-raising drive. The highlight of campaign was to have been a promotional film stressing the scientific and research emphasis at the university. Feedback from the focus groups toward the film were negative. This information prevented Syracuse University from making a costly error in their communication. Is there enough information presented for students to evaluate this research? Do students feel there is additional research needed? Could students make additonal conclusions from this study? Do students draw the same conclusions as the textbook authors?

6. **Question definitions.** Baskin & Aronoff (p. 65) define **Liaisons** as, "Linking pins that connect two or more groups within the organiztional communication network." What is a linking pin? Is it animal, mineral, or vegtable? What is a network? What is an organizational communication network? Can students give an example of a Liaison? Can students define the term in their own words?

Summary

This paper illustrates how critical thinking activities can be integrated into a public relations course. Critical thinking can be taught directly and can be integrated into the purpose, objectives, and work that students produce.

Students should be rewarded for trying to improve their thinking skills—what ever level that improvement is. And the prevailing view among researchers is that the best way to

improve students' critical thinking skills is through guided practice within individual subjects (Nickerson, Perkins, & Smith 1985). Teaching students public relations includes theory and materials (e.g. newsrelease, PSA), as well as learning to critically analyize that information to choose the best for their organization.

Endnotes

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